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Enacting is enough: Commentary on Dave Ward's 'The agent in magenta'

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Abstract

In the action-space account of color, an emphasis is laid on implicit knowledge when it comes to experience, and explanatory ambitions are expressed. If the knowledge claims are interpreted in a strong way, the action-space account becomes a form of conservative enactivism, which is a kind of cognitivism. Only if the knowledge claims are weakly interpreted, the action space-account can be seen as a distinctive form of enactivism, but then all reductive explanatory ambitions must be abandoned.

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1. The Action-Space Account as an Explanatory Theory of Color Experience

The core of "The Agent in Magenta," consists in the promotion of the *action-space* account of color consciousness over that of the sensorimotor contingency theory. Despite other important differences, both views agree in placing primary emphasis on implicit knowledge when it comes to experience[3]. The former focuses on how such knowledge matters to understanding the consequences that experience has for action while the latter focuses on the consequences actions have for perception. In stressing this, the action-space account can be interpreted as a version of conservative enactivism with explanatory ambitions. Conservative (as opposed, to radical versions of enactivism, on which we'll expand below) are precisely those that make essential appeal to mediating knowledge when it comes to understanding the basis of experience.

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[3] The claims regarding implicit knowledge in the sensorimotor contingency theory vary, depending on the locus of expression. For a version of the sensorimotor contingency theory with very weak such claims, see Myin & O'Regan (2009).

The action-space account falls into this category because it defends the idea that color experiences can be explained in terms of implicit knowledge relating to abilities such as the ability to sort, sift and track colored things, which are in turn grounded in and enabled by abilities to discriminate colors from each other. Our proclivities to discriminate colors from each other can be charted via standard psychophysical procedures by constructing a space in which all discriminable color stimuli are ordered in terms of their relations of experienced similarity. As such, this space can be said to *characterize* our discriminative abilities – that is its geometry is "dictated by the extent of a perceiver's sensitivity to similarities and differences to its constituent shades" (p. 8).

The action-space account holds that implicit knowledge of the enabled abilities in question provides an *explanatory* basis, by which it seeks to explicate the content and character of color appearances in terms of a "more basic account" (p. 19). It is repeatedly emphasized that the explanatory weight is to be carried by appeals to "implicit knowledge," an "understanding," or an "implicit grasp" of the possibilities of our discriminative abilities, via a grasping of the totality of relations in which colors stand to each other. In short:

> Action-space theorists (...) claim that an agent's experiences of color are explained by her implicit knowledge that a certain range of discriminatory abilities is enabled for her. The enabling of these abilities constitutes her occupying a specific point in a complex space of possible enabled discriminatory abilities, the geometry of which is given by the totality of similarity and difference relations obtaining between colors to which the perceiver is sensitive (p. 9).

We think it is right for the action-space account to lay emphasis on the role experiences play in enabling further actions. This locates experience where it belongs – namely, in the "active lives" of experiencers (to borrow a phrase from Noë (2004)). Nevertheless, the appeals made to implicit knowledge by defenders of the action-space account are either unclear or problematic.

It is not clear how we should understand the claim that color experience can be explained by implicit knowledge that a certain range of abilities is enabled. Part of the trouble concerns what is meant by 'explained' here. Leaving that aside, how should we understand the claim that an agent has implicit knowledge that a certain range of abilities is enabled? Prima facie, it might mean that the agent (or its brain) represents these possibilities at some level – that is its know-how is encoded in an information base of some sort – perhaps not in a way that is consciously accessible. Accordingly, use of this sort of knowledge is causally responsible and hence explains experience. Let us call this the strong reading. A weaker reading is also possible. Color experiences might simply be explained by *the fact* that certain abilities are in fact exercised and that this in some sense constitutes the exhibition of implicit knowledge. Under this reading, these abilities have a certain structure, but "knowledge about this structure" fades into the background in that it is not causally responsible for generating experiences. Let us start by discussing this weak reading.

1.1. The Weak Reading:

According to the weak reading, color looks are explained by enabled abilities to discriminate colors from one another. Such discriminations are structured in ways that can be described by a psychophysical color space (this use of psychophysics has been admirably explored philosophically by Austen Clark (1993)).

But how does this connect with the idea that discriminative abilities are enabled? To say that a discriminatory ability is enabled can only mean that actual discrimination is possible. Well, it is certainly true that, when seeing a color, one must discriminate it from other colors surrounding it – otherwise one would *not* see it.[4] And it is also true that one *could* discriminate it from a great number of other colors – or other colored backgrounds— had they been present instead of the actual one. Indeed it is the more global ability to discriminate a color from a multiplicity of other colors that gets characterized by the standard psychophysical methods, which lead to the psychophysical color discrimination spaces. Such space can indeed be said to characterize the color discrimination abilities of average human subjects (or of specific persons, if constructed on an individual basis). However, such a psychophysical space should be understood for what it is: A purely descriptive device that compactly orders large amounts of data about perceptual discriminations, as elicited from subjects under highly constrained conditions. Psychophysics starts with subjects capable of enjoying certain kinds of perceptual experiences, sets up highly constrained environments, and a highly constrained task ("Say if you can discriminate this patch from that patch, or that background"), and offers a means of ordering the totality of these discriminative reactions. Psychophysics, and the multidimensional sensory spaces that result from it, are merely ways of depicting the logic of color judgments and the experiences (as elicited in a highly constrained context) on which those discriminative judgments are based. A psychophysical space compacts – brings together in one abstract place – a series of judgments over time.

Thus it makes explicit a structure that is already present in color experiences and judgments. Therefore, it could not constitute a "more basic account" that "reductively *explains"* the structure of experience, let alone the experiences themselves. So it seems that, if we stick to the weak reading, strong reductive claims must be abandoned.

If the psychophysical space itself is merely descriptive, perhaps it gains explanatory power by being grasped, or known, or represented, albeit implicitly?

Before we investigate that option, one more remark should be made regarding the relation of the psychophysical color space to actual experience. Undoubtedly, the psychophysical color space tracks important aspects of color experience: how colors relate to each other in terms of experienced similarity. It is a further step, however, to treat this characterization as *the* canonical characterization of color experience – a full "account of color experience in its full richness" – and to assume that the characterization provided by a psychophysical similarity space provides a complete or exhaustive description of color experience. Consider that one could also construct, as

[4] The experience of a distinct color vanishes when the stimulation is of a persisting uniformly colored *Ganzfeld.*

one possibility among an innumerable list of possibilities, a psychophysical space of the relative similarities among colors and sounds (one could ask which sounds are more or less similar to a certain color). Certainly, such a space, which might be different for every different individual, would tell us something about color experience, and its structure, too. Are there any principled reasons to discount such a space as being less relevant to a proper "account of color experience"?

1.2. The Strong Reading

On the strong reading, it is not the enabled abilities themselves, but rather the *implicit knowledge* that these abilities are enabled, that is meant to carry the explanatory weight. What kind of knowledge is this? What grounds do we have for supposing that we genuinely have such knowledge? (See Hutto (2005) for a criticism of this sort of appeal to implicit knowledge by proponents of the sensorimotor view. Since Ward's defense of the action-space account makes the same sort of appeal, the same criticisms apply). How should we understand the claim that "the knowledge that these abilities are enabled explains color looks"? On a substantive reading, it must mean that actually grasping or knowing these possibilities at some level is responsible for the having of certain kinds of experiences. The content of this knowledge must pertain to the enabled abilities. If it were expressed in words, it would amount to a description of the relevant possibilities for action – perhaps, as sets of rules. Thus it would chart these in just the way that psychophysics charts the similarity space. Very roughly, an example of such an item of knowledge, if captured in English, would probably sound something like:

"I see color X, because I could discriminate it from all the other color patches, and I can discriminate it in a way dictated by its place in *this* three-dimensional color space."

If explicitly represented as such this would amount to a kind of metaknowledge about one's abilities and proclivities to discriminate colors. Is something of this sort being posited by proponents of the "action-space" account (it is described as self-understanding on p. 19)? The idea that such knowledge is the subpersonal basis for having experiences is underlined at many points in the paper. In the words of its author:

> According to the action-space view, an after-image or neuroscientifically induced flash suffices to give a perceiver knowledge of a color since the perceiver automatically and implicitly grasps both its place in a network of similar and different colors, and the discriminatory and other abilities that are enabled in virtue of this." (p. 18).

It is quite uncertain, however, whether the content corresponding to such a description exists at all in the heads of agents. Where is the evidence for the existence of such contents? There is certainly no indication that this content actually 'occurs' in our minds at any level, whenever colors are experienced. Certainly, it does not occur 'before our mind's eye.'

Moreover, if, as it seems, this sort of knowledge is meant to explain experiential looks, then what we have here is the picture of the causal generation of

experience out of experience-free processes, as if experiences were additional processes of mental or phenomenal activity that need to be causally generated.

Unless these aspects of the action-space account can be satisfactorily dealt with, the most promising strategy for its defenders would be to let go of the strong claim that the knowledge in question is substantive. Speaking of knowledge might merely be a way of saying that the agent has certain discriminative abilities which, when studied over a large stretch of time, show a certain pattern. That would take us back to the weak reading, which, as we argued above, is descriptive, rather than reductively explanatory.

2. A Distinctive Enactivism

Surrendering the strong interpretation and the aim of reductive explanation in terms of a more basic account does not diminish the value of the core idea behind the action-space account of color experience, or perceptual experience in general. On the contrary, it can bring out what is truly distinctive about this sort of enactivism when compared with standard offerings of a more traditional cognitivist and reductive bent.

It is to avoid just such problems that we advocate a version of *radical enactivism* (see Hutto (2005); also Myin and De Nul (2006) for the beginnings of a construal of the sensorimotor contingency theory along radical enactivist lines). According to radical enactivism, to be perceptually aware is just a matter of exercising perceptual abilities. The radical enactivist endorses the idea that perceptual experience is constituted by temporally extended interactions between creatures and aspects of the world. Accordingly, perceptual consciousness is best understood as a kind of environmentally situated organismic activity. Radical enactivists deny the view that experiences are inner events or states of mind and that consciousness depends on a subject's having mental acquaintance with the special properties of such inner happenings. Rather, subjective experiences are identified with environmentally embedded, temporally and spatially extended activities and worldly interactions of organisms. It is the specific nature of such interactions that decide the phenomenal character of token acts of experiencing. Experiencing is a world-relating, intentional activity that incorporates aspects of an organism's brain, body and environment. From this description it can be seen that the emphasis in radical enactivism is on the activity itself, rather than the inner events that enable such activities, let alone on the activation of knowledge concerning such activities. Radical enactivism should not be mistaken for a behavioristic identification of experience with outer actions. For it distinctively lays a fundamental emphasis on the aspect of enacting: It is by *engaging* in certain, perhaps complex, forms of activities of perceiving that you perceive. Being experientially aware *just is* enacting[5]. Perceptual experience, conscious perception, in other words belongs to the realm of acting in a broad sense – including being acted upon. It is in this broad sense, in the sense that "experience is realized in the active life" of perceivers' (Noë, 2004, p. 227), that experience "is something we do" (O'Regan & Noë, 2001, p. 960, p. 970), (Noë, 2004, p. 1). Radical enactivism, as a stance towards consciousness, and thus perceptual awareness, is opposed to a cognitivist identification of perceptual awareness with any variety of inner act of apprehension or representation (where the latter is understood as standing in relation

[5] Note also that enacting does not imply that one is continuously generating bodily movements.

to some kind of content). Read under the auspices of the strong interpretation, the action-space account comes dangerously close to being just another variant of cognitivism, albeit one in which the cognitive or representational processes that "account for" experience carry action related-content (for this kind of explicitly cognitivist rendering of enactivism, see Prinz (2009)).

By contrast, it is the emphasis on equating experience with enacting that separates radical enactivism from those accounts that attempt to reductively explain perceptual awareness. For a reductive explanation of perceptual awareness, one would seek to account for the occurrence of perceptual awareness in terms of some more basic process, mechanism or property that somehow gives rise to perceptual awareness. Radical enactivists see that aim as futile: it is by actually carrying out one's perceptual abilities that there is perceptual awareness. Though all kinds of more basic events occur while you engage in these activities, none of those by itself reductively explains consciousness[6].

This applies in a straightforward way to the case of color. A radical enactivist can happily embrace what was called the weak reading discussed above, with one important caveat: One experiences color because certain abilities are not only enabled but appropriately exercised, in the sense of actually enacted. A radical enactivist also embraces the idea that the abilities are stretched out over time: Our abilities with respect to experiencing color amount to more than what one does at any single moment. Radical enactivists resist the inclination to compress this temporally extended process into one that occurs instantaneously in the mind. Such compression of an ability into a moment – that is in which it is immediately and implicitly "grasped" in its entirety— is an unmotivated and unnecessary move. No additional explanatory leverage is provided by assuming – without evidence – that color experience is based on the additional, instantaneous grasp of the implicit knowledge of one's chromatic abilities (whatever that might mean exactly). Radical enactivism provides a substantial and liberating contribution to our understanding of perceptual consciousness precisely because it provides a conception of experience in which the superfluousness of such a move becomes visible. Enaction is enough – for color experience and for perceptual awareness in general.

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[6] In the final pages of Noë (2004), one can find a similar line of thought.

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